

Foreword

It used to be easy to know what public art is—the Civil War general on horseback in the park, the large steel sculpture in the bank plaza, the wall mural in the building lobby or on the outside of the gymnasium. These types of artworks, often referred to as “public art,” are really “art in public places.” They are examples of art that is primarily referential to the artist who created the work or to the event that inspired it—the vision of one person or about one thing. While these examples may be historically satisfying and enriching, we have since discovered that such artworks fall short of meeting today’s needs—artworks like these often do not address their places or engage the people in and around their sites.

To meet the art requirements of today’s world, we have discovered that we should try options other than painting and sculpture. We have discovered we must redefine how artists work in public and whom their work is for—we have had to redefine public art. We have discovered that public art is not about the artist. The artist may be the maker, but public art is an avenue for communities to share and explore their collective memory and shared future. Public art is the collaborative creation of places of focus and context; it is a forum

for creatively applied vision to build our common public realm. Public art is the art form of civic discourse.

As “art in public places” has evolved into “public art” we have discovered that public art is not for all artists. Public art—as different from art in public places as bronze is from paint—requires a different kind of artist. Just as we would not expect a master painter to succeed immediately as a bronze sculptor, we likewise have learned that the master painter may not find success in the practice of public art. It requires the ability to *not* own an idea and to recognize the validity of another person’s point of view, the capacity to be inclusive, the willingness to solve problems through open-ended discussion, the talent to respond appropriately to the unique conditions of a site and the entire community who populate that place, and the commitment to engage the participation of all.

When successful, today’s public art—or the influence of a public artist—is so deeply integrated into its site that it is fundamentally impossible to separate the art from its site. Yesterday’s sculptures and murals have grown into a greatly expanded range of projects, and today public artists participate in the design of rail and bus transit systems, highway structures, airports, sewage treat-

ment plants, watershed and wetlands restoration, solid waste facilities and landfills, pumping stations and flood control efforts, streetscape design, urban planning and community building.

With these changing projects and site conditions, artists have responded with an ever-widening array of materials, techniques, and formats for working. Studio materials of steel, bronze, canvas, and paint have yielded to elements like light and sound, seating and pathways, bridges of living materials, and the creative manipulation of all common construction materials used to build our cities and public spaces. Public artists are becoming deeply engaged in the processes and systems that propel our communities forward.

Public art is an ever-evolving practice. By working with communities and cities as they undertake resolution of problems and engage new goals, public artists look to exploration, adjustment, new processes, and new methods to reexamine old questions with new solutions. This practice continually suggests new realms for exploration by public artists, provides fresh answers for the public realm, and creates public art that is becoming the art of making places public.

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